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SEA TURTLE DISTRIBUTION AND NESTING GROUND IN CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT

Two species of sea turtle, hawksbill and green turtle, are common in Cambodia. These two species can be seen and caught accidentally by fishermen who use stingray hooks and line. In Kep municipality 100 - 120 turtles are caught per year. Green turtles can be seen in Kampot province, in the eastern part of Koh Karang of Kep municipality and Koh Krass of Koh Kong province; hawksbill turtle occurs in Kampot province, west of Koh Angkrang, south of Koh Karang in Kep municipality, and in Koh Kong province. Moreover, both hawksbill and green turtles can be found in Sihanoukville. Sea turtles come to the beach to lay their eggs from September to April. Hawksbill turtles are seen to migrate to the beach of Koh Ses in the middle of September to lay its eggs. Recently, some nesting beaches of turtles have been identified by gathering information from interviewing the coastal fishermen.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have indicated that Cambodia have five species of sea turtles, namely loggerhead turtle *Caretta caretta*, olive ridley turtle *Lepidochelys olivacea*, green turtle *Chelonia mydas*, hawksbill turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata* and leatherback turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*. Among these five species, only two, green turtle and hawksbill turtle, are commonly found and known to nest along the Cambodian coastline.

Due to the lack of information on sea turtle distribution and nesting sites for managing and conserving of sea turtles in Cambodia, the Department of Fisheries in cooperation with WWF-Indochina conducted a seminar/workshop on the sea turtle research, biology and conservation in Cambodia. This seminar/workshop was held from 2nd to 4th September 2002. The aim of this seminar/workshop were (i) to exchange information and experiences from international experts about sea turtles conservation and research, (ii) to establish a network of sea turtle scientists and managers for future collaboration, capacity building and public awareness, (iii) to discuss on the cooperative research and conservation in the future, (iv) to increase the knowledge on biology, taxonomy, survey techniques and conservation of sea turtles and (v) to collect and update all information related to sea turtle populations, distribution, conservation and management in ASEAN region.

The aim of this paper is to present information concerning distribution and abundance for future conservation and management of sea turtles in Cambodia.

METHODS

Two methods were selected for this study: the first is to interview fishermen who have experienced in sea turtle fishing and collecting egg along the coastline of Cambodia and the second is questioning the old fishermen who are living and fishing in the coastal area. These surveys consisted of 12 fishermen in which, 9 fishermen are living in Kampot province and 3 fishermen are living in Sihanoukville.

DISTRIBUTION OF SEA TURTLES

Sea turtles are known to migrate for long distances between their feeding grounds and nesting sites during their adult lives. From data on by-catch owing to stingray hooks and line, it is known that green turtle and hawksbill turtle are abundant and caught in large numbers around seagrass sites; around 100-120 sea turtles, not identified to species, are caught per year in Kep municipality (Fishermen, pers. comm.). According to Try (2003), islands such as Kilodapi Village, Kbal Romeas, Koh Rong, Koh Rong Sanleum, Koh Khteas, Koh Ses, Koh Polowai, Koh Thmey, Koh Tunsay, Koh Po, Koh Tbal, Koh Dong, Koh Preah, Koh Pring, Koh Tang, Koh Sdach, Koh Krass, Thmar Rieng, Thmar Kandal and Thmar Anteas Banh have been identified as sites for observing sea turtles, again with no reference to a particular species of sea turtle.

Green turtles can be seen at Koh Khteas, Koh Dong, Kilodapi, Kbal Romeas of Kampot province, eastern part of Koh Karang of Kep municipality and Thmar Rieng, Thmar Kandal and Thmar Anteas Banh of Koh Kong province. Moreover, two green turtles were caught accidentally by stingray hooks and line at Koh Krass in Koh Kong province (late August 2002). These turtles were released during the workshop on sea turtles research, biology and conservation in Cambodia from 2-4 September 2002 in Sihanoukville. Before being released those turtles were weighed and tagged, one of them had a PTT attached to her carapace.

The larger specimen was a female weighing 92 kg. It was tagged with inconel with Cambodia Code and also had a Platform Transmitter Terminal (PTT) attached to her carapace. The smaller animal (a female) weighed 88 kg and was tagged with inconel. After tagging, they were both released into the sea. The turtle with the PTT was caught by accident again on 26 September at Thmor Rieng, Sre Ambel district. After the capture the fishermen called the sea turtles working group and they went to release it again on 30 September 2002.

Hawksbill turtle can be seen at Koh Dong, Kbal Romeas, Phoum Ta Ang of Kampot province, west of Koh Angkrang, and south of Koh Karang of Kep municipality and Thmar Rieng, Thmar Kandal and Thmar Anteas Banh of Koh Kong province.

Loggerhead turtles are rarely seen, but have been reported at Kilodapi of Kampot province and south of Koh Tbal, East of Koh Karang of Kep resort city.

Olive Ridley turtles have been rarely seen at Kbal Romeas of Kampot province and eastern part of Koh Pou, west of Koh Angkrang of Kep resort city.

There is no information related to Leatherback turtle, but in year 2000, one specimen of this turtle was caught accidentally by trawl net. It was immediately released because the fisherman was scared and believed that this species is poisonous.

Hawksbill and green turtles are caught accidentaly around Poy Sareur, Koh Tang, Koh Pring, Koh Russy, Koh Thas, Koh Dong, Poy Rong Rang, Anloung Sor, Koh Ses, Koh Rong and Koh Rong Sanleum (Try, 2003; Fishermen, pers. comm.).

NESTING GROUND AND NESTING SEASON

In Cambodia, sea turtles lay their eggs from September to April, especially, during the full moon of October and December (Try, 2002). Actually, in the middle September 2002, a hawksbill turtle was reported to have come to the beach at Koh Ses, Sihanoukville, to lay its eggs (Fishermen, pers. comm.).

Old fishermen report that over the last 40 years, there have been many nests at Koh Ses. Recently one hawksbill turtle have been seen at a sandy beach of Koh Ses for laying its eggs but unfortunately the female turtle was killed by military on the island before a fishery officer could contact them. Over the last 10 years, some nests of sea turtle have been seen at Koh Tunsay but the actual number of nests is not known.

Old fishermen said that they have collected eggs from October to February. Before 1988 they used to collect turtle eggs at Koh Thmey and Koh Ses and before 1993, they collected the eggs at a sandy beach of Oh Chheuteal (12 nests per year), Koh Anloung (10 nests per year), Koh Rong (12 nests per year), Brorlaymeas (7 nests per year) and Thmor Kropeur (3 nests per year).

Other sea turtle nesting grounds are sandy beaches of Chke Prous, Tanun and Trapeang Roung of Koh Kong province and sandy beaches of Koh Thas, Koh Rong, Koh Rong Sanleum, Koh Tang and Koh Pring (Tana, 1997). Of these sandy beaches, some islands have been disturbed by human activities, so that turtles have to move to other beaches where there are no

disturbances (Longdy, 2002). Recently, according to Try (2003), sea turtle nesting grounds have been identified at Koh Rong, Koh Rong Sanleum, Koh Tang, Koh Pring, Koh Poulewai, Koh Thmey, Koh Tonsay, Koh Ses, Koh Dong, Poy Sa Reur and Brorlaymeas. Moreover, Koh Krass has been identified as nesting ground of Hawksbill turtle.

RECOMMENDATION

Since the Royal Government has no budget for research, activities depend on supporting funds from NGOs. Today, the information and activities related to sea turtles are still insufficient because the scientists have no funding for surveys directly at the nesting grounds, in order to identify the important nesting sites of sea turtles. To submit a proposal for protection of the nests it is necessary to have correct scientific research data.

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